Arts & Letters Syndicate Series

AUTUMN AIRS

A bunch of Old
&
New Poems

P. R. TAIKAD

Kalpa Printers & Publishers Pvt. Ltd.,
Calcutta.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P. R. Taikad is the pen name of a veteran journalist of New Delhi. Belonging to a profession which compels him to meet people of all kinds and write on men and events day after day, he finds relaxation in talking, not writing, and spending time with his children and telling them stories, real and imaginary, sustained by their lively minds.

The books, now being published, are mostly compilations of a few occasional pieces (salvaged out of an unpreserved or ill-preserved lot) in prose and verse.

Living in the capital with its cosmopolitan population, his writings reflect a perspective of the changing political and social values of the great metropolis with both its triumph and tragedy.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan's Sri Sankarach
Mahavidya

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AIRS

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By

P. R. TAIKAD

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PREFACE

The late Ananda Samarakone, the author of Sri Lanka's national song, spent several weeks in New Delhi many years ago. Despite his great talents, he was almost without food and shelter in this city which had attracted him from his distant home. Composer and singer, he was also a painter. He held an exhibition of his paintings—some forty odd—in the old Constitution House auditorium with no influential backing and hardly any publicity. There was an offer for only one painting and this he would not sell since it represented a dear memory.

During these struggling days, he threw in his lot with a fellow countryman to whom he sold the recording rights of his songs, composed and sung by himself, and got a little pocket money while his partner got the songs recorded by a well-known gramaphone company raising his standard of living from arrack to scotch. This silken gent told me that he was in the potato trade in Simla.

Late one night, Samarakone came to my house. He had just discovered what "potato trade" meant. It was ganja smuggling. Scared of getting mixed up with a criminal crowd, he stopped with me for some days.

Talking about art once, I asked him why his paintings had failed to attract attention. He replied that he belonged to no particular school or group. He painted at random and just as it pleased him to portray his subject. There was nothing excitingly new whether in style or craft. He belonged to no generation, old or new. They were not very popular in his country where the styles were either ancient (like the old Buddhist School) or modern western styles. He thought he would find better appreciation in India where there were so many schools and styles and every form of art found support from one group or another.

I felt sorry for him at the time. The poor man went back to Sri Lanka with his paintings and with what little money he got from the sale of the copyright of his musical recordings. He passed through equally hard days, it would appear, until he died, though now his is a hallowed name. There is a reference to him in one of the poems in this volume entitled "Backgrounds".

This sad story comes to my mind as I go to the press with a collection of my poems. They too are random compositions observing no rule and emulating no school of of poetry, old or new. I pay my tribute to my friend's memory by adopting his philosophy about his work and his art.

I should perhaps add by way of introduction that the poems in this book are so few and of such an assorted kind that one cannot in any case look for any literary pattern in them. One general point of interest may, however, be how essentially Indian themes and ideas are sought to be expressed in an alien language which English undoubtedly is to most Indians. If one remembers that Indian society itself with its complex cultural mosaic is infinitely varied, the expression of such ideas becomes even more intricate so that even to Indian readers they can present nuances, jarring or appealing as the case may be according to their likes and dislikes. The poem "The Final Option" in this book may thus be seen by a sophisticated modern mind, Indian or foreign, to be an expression of a particular type of vedic or mythological moralism. In the vernacular, the the notes would be familiar but how would they read in English ? So may one see the trilogy on the Lakshminarayan Temple in New Delhi or the poem "Meditation" or the one entitled "Ever being, never showing" and yet another with the title "The end is no end." For a different mood, one may look at the mocking style of the semi-political poems "In Saffron Robes" with its faintly moral ending or "Thoughts on Rajghat". Thus, Indian thought on varied themes, each carrying its own socially individualistic perspective, expressed in any form, can, in a setting of developing ideas on social and moral concepts, range from the sublime to the ridiculous. And, in regard to poetry, its prosodic and stylistic pecularities can vary from the most archaic to the most radically modern.

Another angle to this theme is how Indian sensibility itself is subject to the impact of alien ideas through the medium of the English language. To illustrate the point rather exaggeratedly, the Thames, Waterloo Bridge and the skylark can be dangerously intrusive, along with "warm-heartedness", into Indian imagery. Literary critics are admirably sensitive to this sort of piracy, but, conversely, can they be receptive to the intrusion of dharma and karma into Indian poetry in English ?

For an interesting discussion on this and related aspects of Indo-Anglian writing, I may refer to the book "Sensibility under Stress" by Raji Narasimhan, who has made a fascinating study of the subject although it is limited to some books of fiction in English written by Indian authors.

A famous author of the 'Thirties from Madras called his essays "Paper Boats". These are my paper boats. I presume they carry all this cargo of faults and virtues.

I add to this preface the copy of a letter to an English friend dealing in general terms with the problem of Indo-Anglian writers.

This is not a book of anthology. Nevertheless, some poems by a young poet, "Biya", are included in it for their distinctive style.

One has only to go to the extremely attractive books published by the Writers Workshop, Calcutta, to have a glimpse of the growing wealth and variety of Indo-Anglian writing both in prose and verse. (The sentiments provoked by a visit to this unique publishing institution are recorded in a poem in this volume).

I would also like to include a reference here to my life-long friend, Mahakavi M. P. Appan, the eminent Malayalam poet and literary critic of Kerala, some of whose poems find free-style renderings in this volume. I attempted these as an experiment in the presentation of local linguistic idioms in English, but I must confess that the experiment has not been a success with the result that these lines tend to be more ideas suggested by the original rather than translations.

The notes at the end are meant for those who may find a need for them.

31-1-1978
New Delhi.

P.R.T.

A LETTER TO AN ENGLISHMAN

Dear friend,

After receiving your helpful comments on my Mss. I kept pondering over the wisdom of sending it to my publishers I realized that, ultimately, I would have to make up my mind myself about it.

I do not know whether you have seen the book "The Great Betrayal" by our well-known Anglo-Indian leader, Mr. Frank Anthony. His theme was that the British, after ruling India for two centuries, left behind their Anglo-Indian progeny with what to free India would be an alien language and an alien culture and without providing adequate safeguards for their survival.

Is this problem confined to Anglo-Indians? I am not sure that it does not affect a whole lot of others also, who, in the course of three or four generations, adopted for themselves the English language and a good deal of English social and cultural habits, though, whether they knew it or not, they could never be English born to the race and culture as it were, especially as most of them lived what was practically a bi-cultural life in a powerfully dominant social and religious environment. I would like to share with you some thoughts on how this legacy manifested itself before and after independence.

In the small district town of Palghat, in the south of India, there was within living memory an old gentleman who decided to make of himself a British country Squire. Fortunately for him, he had wealth, houses *and lands and also a local community depending on his largesse. He had paid only a brief visit to England, but that did not prevent him from evolving a copybook pattern of British country life, derived largely from English literature, to a considerable extent Victorian.*

Discarding the local costume of a dhoti (or mundu, as it is called in that part of the country) worn round his torso, he adopted lounge suits, plus-fours, the morning cap complete with a pipe and the prescribed dress for the evenings and dinner suit for the night. This old faithful of the Union Jack, not being content with making himself a brown proto-type of a British squire, insisted on his wife, an old fat woman of 55, wearing frocks and evening gowns, her hair shingled and walking with high-heeled shoes. For the rest, tea, bread and fried eggs went for breakfast with the morning newspaper (alas, not the Times) placed on the table by a properly accoutred butler.

One may be amused, but, in varying degrees, the British left a good number of such Squires "civilised" in proper English fashion. One can still see remnants of them in old places in India like Ootacamund, Simla or even Calcutta, that "cradle of Indian nationalism." The British, in the words of Mr. Anthony, not only betrayed the Anglo-Indians but many such people, all now fortunately of lamented memory.

Despite the upsurge of nationalism, truants survived in varying disguises, but ultimately, I think, settled down to merely adopting the English language for themselves for good. One may trace this tradition to the late Rt. Hon. V. S. Sreenivasa Sastry P.C.C.H., who *used to be known as the "silver-tongued orator" (in the English language, of course) and gave a series of lectures, still read with interest for their "creative interpretation" of the great Hindu epic Ramayana. That was the picture during the march to freedom.*

Post-independence generations contain many who, although strongly nationalistic, nurtured their admiration and partiality for the English language. After all the transmutations, all these Indians, quite proud of their national status, have settled into groups who defend their right to write in English. They are known as Indo-Anglian writers, being carefully distinguished from Mr. Frank Anthony's Anglo-Indians. One may regard them as people with Indian hearts and English pens since they cannot express themselves for literary purposes in any language other than English, though how well or ill they do so in English is another matter. I have no doubt in my mind that I belong to this generation and such writing as I have done should reflect its merits and limitations.

This brings me to the point of my decision about the publication of my books. I felt that, such as they are, they represent the thoughts and sentiments of people who think like me and, as such, therefore may draw some interest.

I am conscious that it may require a spirit of tolerance to understand them or even read them sympathetically. But I submit that they deserve to be read, if for no other reason, for the fact that they are so "different".

May I explain my point a little in general terms with reference to Indo-Anglian writers as a whole?

What is basic to their situation is that, in the post-colonial era, except the English language as a medium of expression, there is perhaps little in common between them and the English people. Nor is this the limit of the gap, for, even in regard to English creative writing, with which alone we are concerned at the moment, divergence in perspectives in regard to themes and arguments and also forms of expression lead to stylistic variations of different kinds. And, in regard to India, there are variations in the social and cultural background of the different regions which make up the sub-continent, with their respective substrata, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and so on. All these are inevitably reflected in their writing.

Considering that Indo-Anglian writing, both in prose and verse, has begun to proliferate vigorously, friends like you in England must be wondering whether history has done the right thing by you, Englishmen, by throwing the English of your kings and queens to the high winds so that it has poured its pollens on many lands and germinated colourful variations of the English language with their own jarring or, if you would like to call it so in your English way, charming, aberrations in syntax, spelling and intonation.

You may recollect that the famous quotation "The sun never sets in the British Empire," was not a popular slogan with the former colonies of the British crown. But today, the truth cannot be hidden that the sun never sets on the English-speaking world. Winston Churchill wrote about the English-speaking peoples of the world, but in the pursuit of the dispersal of the British race, the great statesman missed what is per-

haps a grander theme, namely, the dispersal of the English language among millions of people who are non-British. Though not their mother tongue, English is today the adopted language of expression of many races all over the globe.

What is happening is perhaps reminiscent of the Renaissance which occurred periodically in English history during the last five or six centuries. Only, it is not now confined to the British Isles. With English planted by the erstwhile colonial regime in several countries, English literature in the world as a whole is feeling the impact of multi-racial and multi-cultural outpourings from different countries which formerly formed parts of the British empire. The variety of such literature must inevitably be both staggering and baffling, adopting different idioms in India, Burma, Pakistan,, Sri Lanka, the African countries and the West Indies, even if you exclude USA and Australia—in all countries in fact where the English language has found new roots.

Apart from the inevitable local variations in themes, forms and styles, such literature has also understandably registered the impact on it of the changing pattern and styles of the English literature of the traditionally English-speaking countries. You must read to believe the Imagist poetry of the Indo-Anglians. The English literature of the world is thus fast becoming a magnificient assemblage of varieties of experimental writing. Any kind of discipline or standardisation, at any rate at this stage of its growth, although desirable, would appear to be an impossible exercise. And so, let a hundred blossoms bloom.

I think I have given you the rationale behind this publication. Good, bad or indifferent, in a remote and vicarious way, its home is England, the England (of the English language) which remains unknown to many who make free, as I have done, with her glorious tongue.

For this, may I say, thank you?

DEDICATION

To
our father
who is no more with us
but, while he lived, introduced us to
the wealth of English literature
and
our mother
who, at 89, has been in a hurry
to see this book published

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My children, Manju, Lalloo, Jenji, Tarini, Pappu and Viji, have insisted that I must write and sentenced me to authorship.

My wife asked : "Why not ?" and helped me with the publication of the book.

My beloved friend, Jagdish Prasad Chaturvedi, made me shy to meet him telling me relentlessly, "You always say 'you will write' but you will never write". Well, friend, here is the finished goods.

But for my brother, whose motto is 'Go Ahead', this book and its companion volume, "Abhilasha and other Stories" would never have been printed and published.

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THE BLIND BEGGAR'S GUIDE

She led him from door to door, as would
An angel lead the blind spirit
Of man from world to world through time ;
Apprised him of ups and downs ; "Turn here",
"Hold", she said, and the trusting man obeyed.

And she grew ; the blind father
By her side felt her mind's muse
As she harkened and listened to the distant
Notes of music at evening's close ;
He could know a yearning heart ; Old Blindness
Ill-combined with Young Desire.

"O Father, I am no child",
She said one day "and no more shall ye
Hence, beg from door to door".
And she went and worked for him.
But at each morn and eve,
As she clasped him with fond arms,
He felt her mind away.
"Angel", he sighed softly, "Too long it seems
To me, you've been away."
About him she flung her arms ;
"O father, it is all so sweet."

And anon one day, he heard new feet
And his daughter murmered: "This is my father"
The blind man stretched his arms and felt
A pair of robust hands ;
"Who art thou, my son", he asked.

"O father,'' she cried ; he knew—
His blind eyes glistened, he gently breathed :
"Amen.''

Sun shone upon the old man ; his daughter's
Joy gave sight to his spirit ; he saw
The fondling mother kiss the baby girl
And shout at every smile ;
He saw in his vision the child, so much
Alike her mother ; that, led him on —
Longing eyes and blushing cheeks he'd seen
In good days fled to him ; His heart beat hard.

Sun set upon the old man, his heart bled
Through wail and woe ; his life's prop gave way.
He heard them cry, that gathered on that day :
"Peace be to her soul.''
His heart sank.
"Shall we, father, go to mother in Heaven ?''
A tender voice broke upon him.
He held his breath.
"When she calls us, dear," he said.

Age and sorrow played upon him ;
His veins swelled, his skin was rumpled ;
Silky white hair crowned his feverish head ;
But history came back to the old man ;
She grew, she walked and played ;
And at each morn
She lead him from door to door, as would
An angel lead the blind spirit
Of man from world to world through time.

[3].

IN SAFFRON ROBES

Seen you the man who was a rolling stone
That gathered some mass? You see him now;
I am that man, though you'll never know
What a race I ran; my tired eyes gleam,
You see, but can you see if I miss
My robes of the Doctor of Divinity,
Which I lost at the portals
Of ordination? It is true I lost it,
But I've no regrets, for thence began my quest.

I knew what I was after—
Religion, not ritual, faith, not worship;
I knew where to go and soon I was
Where spartan white flooded the place,
Power yielded to abnegation of power,
Wealth to austerity, art to nature;
I joined the Sabarmati[1] camp, in short;
Losing everything, I seemed to gain
Redemption in surrender.

And when Godse[2] did his dirty work,
I begged and scraped to wing my way
To join the mourners, the sea of heads
Slumped in silence for the sin;
But anon, as the tears were dry, it looked
Austerity too had gone away;
Sacrifices, jail-terms and grief
Became lost memories when ambition,
Set patriots on the political chariot.

Nor was I lost in the crowd, for patrons
Were aplenty ; it was always so;
For, who is high where few are lowly ?
Austere and humble but sure of the game,
A high-set star drew me to the race
For a place in the sun.
White khadi tailored to protocol,
*Jodhpurs, **achkan and all
Avid for the plumes of power.

I heaved and pushed to no purpose,
Knew I was losing, the star itself did set ;
My achkan was frayed and sadly,
The cap soiled by constant wear,
The calf-leather shoes lost their tan ;
Greetings to helpful friends
Mellowed to post-cards and, then,
Free telephone calls ; until at last
I knew the game was over.

That was how I came to my saffron robes —
All *dhanyavad*† to those devotees
Who honour priests and monks ;
My poverty became my passport to pelf ;
What had I lost, I wondered ;
The years of service and sacrifice ?
By no means, no, that was all I had
And all I needed, for now I knew
I was set well for my new domain.

* Pyjamas tight down the knees.
** Long buttoned-up coat.
† Hindi word for 'thanks'.

Lest you forget, I was a preacher once
Trained and taught to articulate
The faith to the sheep, yes, that's the phrase ;
And here was I, humble and sweet,
Baptised in Khadi* and Gandhism,
Yet strong in fast and slow cadence,
To suit the hour and the flock ;
Saffron monk, yes, but no ritualist,
I was on firm ground at last.

See me now, rounded as someone said,
Like good Friar Tuck, roaring and rousing,
Crooning and fawning like an Elmer Gantry ;
No assembly that's not moved to muse
On love and faith sans rank and race,
My eloquence swelling in untiring waves ;
My speciality now is youth uplift —
I live now to say life is sweet,
But have I lost my spiritual quest ?

No, deep down my soul I suspect
These robes do play their role,
For, mind you, often do I grieve
I am playing myself out
With no faith more in myself ;
There is an old story of one[3].
Who wore these robes to play a game
But won his spiritual battle ;
The robes may help me yet.

---

* Khaddar signifying simplicity and sacrifice.

[6]

WERE I TO SPEAK

You see your face, drawn and tired,
The beautiful eyes, yes, beautiful still
Though heavy-lidded now, the rounded cheeks,
No more rounded, their dimples gone,
Graceful yet though sadly sagging ;
You see yourself but not me !

If I have my speech and were I
To unfold the album of pictures
You have seen through me, your favourite mirror,
I should be greying too
With all those years
Which saw you from seventeen to seventy.

Were I to open that album
From my memory, won't you be sad too,
Dear girl, who beamed when you first looked into me,
Your eyes arched, your lips in a smile.
And thanked your grandma for the gift ?
Yes, you looked at me and smiled.

Were you ever vain, I wonder ;
But then, you never lingered before me
As do some who love themselves.
Perhaps, you knew or thought yourself pretty
As on that very day when you peered to see
In a thrill whether he was right !

He asked you to part your hair
On the left, he liked it that way !

Would you do that now, dear?
You are old and he has gone
You would miss him the more, you say,
Change, change everything and so miss nothing.

In my album too, as in your memory,
Is that vivid picture of a pallor
When you knew you'd soon be a mother;
You were shy and felt odd;
You were yourself almost a child
You thought—long ago, it was long ago.

Then he came and from behind
Held you in an embrace
With you in a strange resignation;
Not long after, he did so again,
Then you had the baby in your arms
He peering down your shoulder.

Yes, think of me, your dear old friend,
Who has smiled with you,
Has pouted lips with you
Shed a few odd tears too
When once, hurt by neglect, bitter in heart,
You came to me to wipe them away.

Had I the form to have a heart
And eyes like those you set on me
Wouldn't I have wept and grieved
Through the years when you found
Less and still less time for me
And then only to sigh and pass.

You look now, with all those memories
And a thousand more, bitter sweet ;
Now you are old, hair grey,
Eyes heavy, tired of limbs
And heavy of heart—I will be lonely too.
Yes, my dear, when you are gone.

OF STEP-MOTHERS

Like the morning sun she beamed on me ;
The eyes mellowed into a soft caress,
Smiling lips unveiled pearls of the sea,
Her beauty and charm seemed meant to bless ;
Why, it was Heaven pouring in grace divine
Truth, mercy, goodness, fullness of everything good ;
I glowed and thrilled, I was just a boy of nine ;
"You sure will be my son", she cooed.
I saw my step-mother—the step was deep—in a year's time
What a year ! I sank that year and sank so low
To please her Dirty Majesty, queen of lies and slime
Her gilded fangs held me in horror and woe
Anger burnt through her eyes, their shafts drilled into mine
And when the lips parted, the bared teeth chilled my spine.

* * *

I did not see her at first, my father's burly form
Filled the door—then she came, eyes wide in wonder
With wind-rustled hair as if she came through a storm,
Boyish buoyancy and by thrill marked until the thunder
Of my father's voice boomed ; Hark, my lass, get around ;
The honeymoon is over; this is life, hard life at its core
Which means sweeping and scrubbing ; watch your ground,
I am a rough man; as my father swivelled and swore
Tear-glistening, beautiful eyes turned to me ;
Its appeal caught my heart ; no, not a step-mother,
But my friend and sister forlorn and ever to be
My companion in distress, a comfort to one another ;
The year passed and the man who had wed bared his breed
To bind his wife to his girl of seven as mother indeed.

THOUGHTS AT RAJGHAT

Shocked you were, though you never could be,
Sure you were shocked, it must be so,
For you asked not the question, why should he,
Why, why, why, he fired at you ?
Yes, you would have asked that question
And the answer you would have known, had you lived.

The world knows it now ; he made no bones
And told the Court everything, he was not mad.
Everyone said so, but they were wrong ;
He was not mad, but he was a killer—
Are you now, as they say, a spirit, a soul eternal
A light that lives in people's hearts ?

You will know then he killed, as he said,
For a cause ; he said he removed an obstacle ;
Weren't you prepared to die, for a cause ?
You were prepared to kill yourself, he went one step ahead
And killed someone else and paid the price.
His shelter was his "cause".

Did you hear, there is a gang, a movement,
To keep Hitler's phantom alive ?
How many he killed, the sadist—millions,
Still, some save his memory for their cause !
The cause, it is always the cause—
Die, kill, annihilate, yes, but call it a cause.

May be, the difference is in the technique
And the intention ; the law knows it all

And lawyers with big fees — homicide
Not amounting to murder, moment of insanity,
Self-defence and what not ; still some get hanged
Believing they die for a cause.

Did you die for a cause, O father,
Did you live for one ?
Are truth and love and mercy causes ?
May be, you lived and died for a cause,
Father of the Nation, since you gave us the cult
Of love and truth and non-violence.

Freedom was your cause, the nation's freedom !
Was it merely seeing the white man quit ?
You wanted to wipe every tear from every eye,
Bring honour to your "Harijans"[1]
And emancipation to women,
The rich to climb down from love not fear.

The jails lost their terror, sacrifices their pangs,
Wealth lost its glamour, being poor was no shame ;
Truth and service became the badge of valour,
A palace was your jail and a hut your palace
Clever talk looked irrelevant beside your home-truths—
Your life was such, you never could die.

How then did all this become a cause, you'd wonder ?
The cause is a twister, a blurb,
A cliche, you might say, a many splendoured thing ;
It is an incense for the God of words
Burnt by men and women to rouse
Masses to tears, outcries and action.

This word cause, it seems is a conch-cry,
A slogan, yes, that may be the word ;
The Muslim cause, the Hindu cause and national cause ;
And lest we forget, the cause of the poor.
Give any adjective and there is a new dish —
Eat with relish and bellow and belch.

And so now you are a cause ! we moderns know
The many causes, but in real terms
It is the talisman which moves the masses ;
And so, Bapu's cause is our cause
We sing the song very loud and long
Until the cause becomes the means not the goal.

There were some good souls who quailed at this
And talked and talked for a full fortnight[2]
To save you from the flag of slogan and song ;
They groped and groped to put into words
The Gandhian doctrine, at least to know
When and where to seek guidance.

Spirit that you are, you should have smiled,
It was a quest elusive ! all the big minds
Spoke at length with great emotion
Fanciful ideas loose and lost
And set it down that dynamic and changing causes
Called for new approaches, even ungandhian.

What remains ? You shed your light
And set alight the desire in human hearts
. . . .

And, so in our story, the poor and humble man
You called Daridranarayan
Began smiling through his tears;
You waged his war and the story ended.

Your torch may well be borne afar
And so our leaders talk and it is sweet to hear
Even once in a while, but values are lost
For your kindly light has yielded place
To the razzle dazzle of pomp and power;
You are thus a sweet memory and no more.

Yet here at Rajghat, rest your soul,
We come and know the peace;
The jumna flows, strong and silent,
Like Time inexorable but gracious
Along nature's expanse you would have loved
But broken now by architects with art designs.

And tearfully come the old memories—
Yes, tearful to those who have heard your voice—
Of the happy bygones, the honour and the glory,
The truth and non-violence and the fasts
With which you crucified the flesh,
Your flesh, and everyone said, Amen!

You earned your fame, you earned your name
You earned many pages in history;
What you lost was your own life—
Your right to your peace, your solitude
Your right to be not a cause but a human being—
Who weeps for Mohandas Kharamchand Gandhi?

But here at Rajghat, the world is yours
Your own world, bless your heart,
Your crazy, spartan, rollicking heart ;
All the fury and the passions gone
With that mad man Godse and his cause—
The world and its causes ! Peace at last.

THE END IS NO END

The dawn it comes
The sun he rises
Every day
Every day.

You know it ever
Think of it never
That's the way
That's the way.

The light is in your house
Bright and gay
Cheer is here
Cheer is here.

The world is fine
The world is good
What a life
What a life.

The light goes out
All is dark
"No, not this way,
Not this way."

Where's the love
Where's the hate
Lost for ever
Lost for ever.

O lights are there
Bright and gay
Everywhere
Everywhere.

Life's a circle
The end is no end
Never a change
Never a change.

The dawn it comes
The sun he rises
Every day
Every day.

THE FINAL OPTION

[PROLOGUE]

In Hindu mythology, Prahlada was the son of the Demon-King Hiranyakasipu who had, after hard penance, won the boon from God that he would not be killed by man or animal, in day-light or at night, inside the house or out in the open, by any weapon. Thus assured of immunity, he conquered the fourteen worlds and assumed the role of a super-God. He forbade his people to utter the name of God "Narayana", but one, only one, of his subjects defied him. That was his son, young Prahlada, whom the father king tried by every means to correct. Finally, asked the king, where is the God you say is everywhere? Is he here in this pillar? Yes, said Prahlada, he is there, he is there, he is everywhere. The time was dusk, the place was the doorstep of the palace. The king smote at the column with his sword and out came an unheard-of form, half-man, half-lion, "Narasimha", who took the king like an infant, laid him on his lap, sitting on the door-step, neither inside the house nor out, tore his chest with his nails. Here ends the legend. Now, the question is whether Prahlada was right in causing the death of his father in this fashion. What was (or could have been) Prahlada's answer?

One word to my son, one only,
One word before I go, and this will not be long ;
I have lost blood and, already lonely,
In my last breath, I cannot be wrong.

You have torn my chest, my throat is clogged
I can scarcely speak, though never soft-spoken ;
You are the victor, I fought hard and dogged,
Lend me my speech, been never so heart-broken.

The Lord smiled, though His face
Was not made for a smile ;
The role was half-man, half-lion, to efface
An immunity obtained by guile.

Speak now, He said, what you will,
Your question cannot have an answer ;
There is simply no answer to that riddle
Unless in your own mind, you become wiser.

May be so, I must accept since I am vanquished ;
Yet my son must tell me, best it's now,
Since what's said at death's door may be cherished
And posterity will know why I went and how.

The world did tremble when I strolled along
The mightiest of the mighty lay at my feet ;
Would not that pride a son, am I wrong ?
Come near, my son, I cannot repeat.

I have a respite and may it be short ;
My life is done, I want to go ;
So hear me, my son, and don't retort,
You haven't heard me, never so low.

What haven't I given you, beauty of form,
Your will, your courage and love of a kind
Unseen and unheard, beyond the norm
Of any fond parent in all mankind.

I think I am passing, tell me, never fear,
No more rebukes and no more thunder ;
Why, from the day your eyes saw clear,
You set your mind on that Horror yonder.

The flower comes from the bud, the tree from the seed
I am your bud and I am your seed ;
I gave all that is best and all that you need ;
I'm in a hurry, speak, isn't it so indeed ?

Laid low, seared and bleeding,
My last breath seeks from you
The answer why so unheeding
You rejected your parent, his love you knew.

Would you, my son, have thought, ever thought,
Your denial would mean this to me ?
You wouldn't have thought, you didn't know the lot
He had for me, yes, you didn't see.

There is a thing called love, my dear,
And there is a thing called 'right';
There is no definition in this life clear
Whether right or love is might.

What is my fault ? It's true, I loved myself
My queen, my son and my people ;
Who doesn't, my dear, love his and himself ?
The right is from birth--O that steeple.

I am going, yes, going fast, that spire
Keeps, calling, flashes of light and gloom ;
Speak, my son, never more you will stir my ire,
Please speak, having led me to my doom.

My father beloved, forgive me first,
Forgive me ever, this load will be heavy
On me for ever, but it is but just
I should tell how right or wrong are we.

In the future before me, endless it will be.
The questions which will be asked but never answered ;
Yet, I know and hear them and it is wrong for me
To hold my speech and be unheard.

Hear me, my father, I am not afraid ;
How can your son be in fear
And what of me my truth has made
May myself to you endear.

You spoke of right and love, dear father,
It's right and love which have guided me ;
Seeing you now, I mourn I had rather
Opted for love and let my world what it be.

You spoke of the bud and spoke of the flower,
They are both in me ever ;
I know very well the glory of my dower,
But true right and love should be forgotten never.

You are in me as I was in you
In the life eternal, the cycle runs ;
Everyone knows it, that's nothing new,
But see the core of the truth for once.

The truth of love is binding,
If crimes are done in its name,
Such crimes always get their finding
Truth has also its game.

That, dear father, is what endures
Truth and the right have to get established ;
It is this faith which cures
The fever of swords which are brandished.

My rebellion, it's nothing else, I see it all,
Was sparked by a single thought ;
Faith and love sure soon would pall
If by fear and force are wrought.

You made your people mute before you,
You didn't seek their loving obedience
In their hearts you never knew
You bred fear and subservience.

Except you, my father, I knew no other God
That would have been so all my days ;
But it dawned on me you outlawed
Freedom and love and joy in grace.

Why did you preach hate, father, why did you,
When you knew God was no entity?
"Narayana", they said, but you knew
It's love and truth they called Almighty.

That set the battle in my mind—
God to all is a symbol of the right
There are many gods of many a kind
But the truth is, that symbol it is that shows the light.

The light of truth, right and justice
This is God in people's minds
When you riled that name, you broke that edifice;
More, the faith which all people binds.

You have paid, dear father, you have paid
For the great wrongs you have done
Against the eternal values which have made
The human race to run.

One truth of your story
Is that wrong can never win ;
You thought your power and your glory
Gave you the right to sin.

That, dear father, is the truth
Human history has to tell ;
To power getting beyond itself forsooth,
Tolls ultimately the bell.

This is the battle between wrong and right
Where you find God as the instrument
Which helps the soul of man to fight
Save himself from enslavement.

See this God, therefore, even in this awesome guise
As really man's own creation ;
Out of his mind, he has been wise
To create for his emancipation.

This is, my father, not a story of you and me
But of the battle which rages
In every mind, though it should never be,
It never ends through the ages.

Here is a tale to teach one and all
That in your mind there is a force ;
To fight the split mind at your call,
Will it to lead for the right course.

So, Goodbye, dear father, you don't die ;
Smited though, you are a guide ;
For those in desperation sigh
You say : Light your God inside.

[23]

THE LOST HIPPIES

Hey Mister, don't laugh—
I am a rough man ;
! am a Yankee, yes,
Give me some money.

I had no food,
Not bread, not tea ;
I want to sleep
But tea first, man, tea.

I have dollars, yes, dollars
Not now, but I'll have, may be,
You want dollars ?
I want a Rupee.

You think I am dirt ?
Yes, I am, now, may be ;
Your country
Is full of dirt.

You know why ?
You dress up
To hide your sins,
Which you can't.

Not by humbug,
Pretense, aping West ;
Boy, you are ridiculous !
I am hungry, but I laugh.

Way back in Tennessee,
India was a dream ;
I saw a monk,
An odd image.

He squatted, spoke low,
Shut his eyes ;
Said little, but
It was a beatific face.

What came over me !
'Twas my soul, I think ;
I became blind
To my environment.

Then, there was hate ;
I hated life and the dollar-craze
And the work and the people
The highways and the byeways.

Home was no home ;
For liberation, release,
Said a voice in my ear,
India is your home.

I mopped my bills
And got my bargain
With my gal
To stick to me.

And she did, look here,
Here she is ;
Pretty, yes, very white,
You will like her.

We flew and landed
To find our souls ;
Then wore out our shoes
Rambling and ambling.

No more dollars,
Our shirts and pants
Are full of holes
As are our souls.

Scraped up more dollars
And we got back
To our weeds
And our trips.

Full two years,
We have sought our souls ;
We have found them,
I think, now.

How, you ask ?
This is how :
Give me a Rupee
We want some tea.

You want this girl,
Take her, I say ;
What say you, Susie,
A full dinner and sleep.

Sleep in a house,
Under a warm roof ;
Good food and a warm bed
What say you, Susie ?

We have our souls
Got them in India ;
This is how:
Take what comes.

We have seen dollars in plenty,
And souls now in plenty ;
They mean nothing to us,
That is our story.

We got lost here,
We love India,
Land of Rishis
Land of nothingness.

You want our dollars ?
You are an Indian ;
Keep your soul white
Give us a Rupee.

AT THE LAKSHMINARAYAN TEMPLE, NEW DELHI

(A Trilogy)

DEVOTEE

Yes my Lord, thy servant is blest ;
What beauty, what mercy, O what peace
Rests on that tranquil face ! Thou beamest
In thine own joy ; Thy mind's at ease
With thy palm softly held in benediction
As if thou would'st say : "Trust in me
Thou children all ; in me is protection,
Strength, courage and I give them thee !"
Yet, in the love-brimming face that glows
With its light on all the world, do I not see
A falling tear ? O down thy cheek it flows
Half-visible ; it flows, Thy pity, on this dizzy
Mad world that, having all, not knows
Thou providest for all, Thy mercy ever grows.

SCEPTIC

I heard his song and I heed the artistry
That has made your form and face set the mood
Of prayer to the pious ; Yes, this sophistry
Of the sculptor's craft and his colours would
Evoke a strange rhythm to the unsophisticated.
Alas for it, I say ; to despair rushing hither from home,
Pity from on high is illusion unmitigated
Unless he stills his mind, not to roam,

To be deceived by itself; Thy pity and all that
Where were those women of Bengal
Ravaged without mercy; Did those eyelids bat
When, in one bold stroke, Thou Yahya[1] and all
Could have dethroned, leastwise to save
Their Honour; Tears! not even a sigh, you gave.

TOURISTS' GUIDE

You now see the Hindu God, Lakshmi-Narayan,
The name, you will see, reaches out to the depth
Of Hindu thought, the coeval identity
In divine dispensation of man and woman;
This marble statue casts in form the vedic words
Which set a check on human ambition;
Thus came Gods and Goddesses in grace and beauty
Matchless, as in charm, mercy and power;
Gods and Goddesses who can do anything, yet not err,
Perfection unattainable, yet attained,
To remind man the speck he is in the astronomy of time,
Space and elemental power lest achievements go to his head.
Lakshmi-Narayan, please see the meaning in the image,
And now, here is Shiva, the Destroyer.[2]

SON OF MINE

The mighty satrap sat on his couch,
Courtiers assembled in full array
His eagle eyes, as all could vouch,
Glided till halted by the queen in sway.

He was wise but meek to the spell
Of the Royal spouse serene;
Was there not a king was wont to tell :
You serve me all, I serve the queen.

The king was kind but the queen was just :
Royal clemency ever flowing to all
Unweighed would do its worst
To goad the falling beyond recall.

The queen it was who ordered stakes
To one who robbed the high priest;
He was dying, they said, of hunger,
"That should'nt absolve him in the least."

They brought to the Court a father
Who sold his children for bread;
The Queen did rule, mercy to him rather
Would help this crime ahead.

They brought the youth audacious
Who sullied his neighbour's daughter
Heinous, heinous, said the Queen, so vicious
The crime is the same as slaughter.

"This man robbed the disabled'',
And they brought him to her grace;
"Take him away manacled.''
The queen said turning her face.

Then there was one caught in the mint
He had taken the gold of the king;
The king did laugh, giving the hint
Honour him for his daring.

The queen was livid : "What cockiness
To rob the king himself !
Throw him into the prison fastness
To rue such greed for pelf''.

A crowd came in great humility
Beating their breasts in the sun
A boatful of kids without pity
Drowned by a youth's fancy for fun.

"Justice we want justice,'' they cried
Tears poured down their cheeks—
Even the king in anger tongue-tied,
"Are there,'' he cried, "such freaks?"

"Death'' said the Queen, "Death
Without mercy for all to see ;
No such crime upon this earth
Should again be heard by me''.

"What strange impulse should goad a youth
To such a sin as this ?
O king, I say forsooth,
Push him down an abyss."

BVBSSMV

Then came what seemed a dull
Whispering kind of mumble
"It is the Prince," she heard in a lull
Her heart in a pitiful crumble.

"Forget and forgive," she moaned
That is the law Divine;
"Forget and forgive, citizens," she groaned,
"The Prince is a son of mine."

BVBSSMV

MY WIFE AND I

"You stampede me to lose my wits—
Thank God," she said, "I know my mind;
Nothing is done by the man who sits
And talks philosophy to mankind."

"It is I should face the music
The final word should rest with me."
"Okay by me," I said "but please be quick
That's the way to keep me care-free."

"Precisely what I call a stampede,"
She yelled and sat on the couch
"Life is not a matter for speed,
You rush me and I will slouch."

Thus began every debate
Lasting many a day and night;
Arguments she had in spate
On facts both wrong and right.

Whether it was on choosing a dress
Or a cupboard for the plates,
She has her flutters endless
Any hustling from me she hates.

Our little one's going to school
Was prolonged for a year
Because she wouldn't "play the fool"
Listening to my thoughts "so queer."

"Put her," I said, "in a convent school"
"To make her a nun?" she queried
"There's a modern school with a swimming pool"
"To drown? Let me not be hurried."

"Let us put her in a country school,"
"To be turned into a rustic?"
"Why not send her to Dr. Spool?"
"That will make her aristocratic."

"I can," she cried, "do a lot of things,
If you stop your advice;
I am full of my dear longings
For my old school which is nice."

After some months it was a day
Of hysterics in my house;
The child, it seemed, had lost her way;
In a tantrum was my spouse.

The child at length did come back,
She had tarried at the games;
But my wife would not be slack
Calling everyone names.

"But for you" she said to me,
"I would have chosen the convent;
The best place for a child to be,
Because of you, my mind was bent."

"That is no shock to me," I murmered;
It was always her thoughtfulness
To blame me as ever she blundered
In utter fitfulness.

Think of us as a merry couple
You wouldn't be very wrong;
We are always in a state so supple
Back and forth in a sing song.

I have checked up on her thought process;
One step forward, two steps backward
Then jump five steps in a sudden excess
Dart back again without a word.

Move again, now, step by step
One, two, three and four;
Quickly step back with a little pep
And pause to think what more !

This arithmetic can go on and on
As my dear good wife makes up her mind;
But, mistake you not, ever and anon,
The blame is on my kind.

MEDITATION

Here am I with a few moments,
Torn out of frenzy, for myself,
Frenzy and the flutter of a thousand cares
Each in a scramble for priority
In my thought-action—how, when, what, who ?
Like some rhythmic drum-beats
They hammer and hammer on my feverish mind ;
Do it, do it now, but pray, not before
You have done what earlier
You left half-done.

That is how it goes, but here am I
For a few moments for myself
Alone with God whom I haven't seen,
Perhaps not even felt, but somehow
My mind has conjured up
As creater, destroyer, the beginning and the end.
Alone, all alone, the mind
In self-imposed duress shutting off the cries
Echoing the frenzy in my mind
Of things undone and half-done.

I am here for the meditation I never miss
For a few moments alone with myself
The curtain drawn on rest of the world.
But open in my mind on a hopeless clash
Of pictures and cries of all sorts,
With a jibe or two at times,
With eyes closed in apparent calm

Waves of thought heaving and crashing,
Pressing, demanding, appealing,
Can't I have a few moments for myself?

Begin, the saint said, with yourself—
"Who am I?", but I've no patience
For, here I am with a form and a name,
Many calls on my time, hopes and desires;
That question is there, but here, meanwhile,
Am I and I know who I am—
Son, friend, father, lover
Besides, O God, the servant
Of many to whom I am answerable
Honour-bound, yes I am, in honour.

With eyes closed and alone
Yet I can't deny myself
For who is here but me, in form and name
Identified, recognising myself
In every outline, with a thousand facts
Reminding me inexorably of myself;
But, in this silence, slowly
The voices do fade away in my loneliness
And the thoughts of a thousand things
Taper off into faint shadows.

For there is a question I ask myself:
How long, how long, this game is going to last
This game of myself playing myself
For which I know there is an end!
And then where do I go,

I, as I know myself?
And so here alone, I face that fact
I am facing myself, no more aware
Of that momentary identity
Limiting me to myself.

I lift myself to a strange universe
A vast expanse of space
Full of stars in one massive revolution
Like a globe of emptiness
Rolling round and round, all round!
There is a silhouette casting a shadow
On this star-lit revolving universe
That I know is mine
I am here, now, here, alone,
As perhaps I may be some day ere long.

Here then are no links, no name
For the shadowy silhouette
Set against this fantastic universe
There are no jobs to do, no duties,
Calls to heed or laughter or tears;
Alone, but liberated and set on wings
Flying high and gliding
In a vast, sky-less, star-filled world
There is silence but for a notional hum
Articulated in the motion.

Alone, alone, all, all alone
This is where there is no beginning
Nor an end, for rolling waves
Of stars seem ready to absorb

The shadows and the silhouettes
Until nothing remains but the stars
In eternal motion in eternal peace
No beginning and no end —
No end, no end, no end, it rolls on
This strange concave globe of stars.

A sharp bell rings and repeats
That's the call bell, somebody calls ;
I am here on earth again,
In form and name again
Identified and recognising myself ;
I hope someone will answer that bell
For, I know, I am hugging myself
Just for a few more slippery moments
To that revolving world of stars
Where I was for a few moments alone.

My meditation ends ; I rise
And descend to the world down below
Away from the rolling stars
And the spaceless sky,
I am here down below ;
I am here and I know who I am
Yet I know where I have been
Where I may be, some day ere long ;
That world lingers on in me,
A part at least of me is no more me.

AT THE COLONIAL OUTPOST

Three men sat in Washington, all equal now,
Hierarchies ended, forms and manners
Without meaning any more, levelled
Like men in a sinking boat
With no hope, not even treachery
To one another, allowed under the animal law
Of anything for survival.

Lounged in their chairs around a glassy table
Shining without dust and papers
But for one mocking little sheet,
The cable which had come from home
Asking them to hold to their posts
"Until further orders," as the phrase goes —
"That is that" said the Boss that was.

With fingers crossed, the three men sat;
The cable was short and sweet;
Yes, sweet if you like—their country was free,
A national government sworn in office,
Freedom's furious battle ended,
All set now in the ex-imperial capital
For the government of the people.

The question unasked but clear in mind
Was how to word the greeting;
Hail and *vive* from renegades
Might be too much even for turncoats;
To resign and quit would be too much too,

In silence, therefore, they contemplated
Till evening when they parted.

Humans, you know, are not rats,
Yet sunk in fear they are worse;
Pegs on pegs went down there throats
Yet up floated the ghost;
They met again the next morning
Determined now to clinch,
But couldn't get beyond "That is that".

Finally, the Chief announced
He would face the music;
He would fly down and speak for all
It was a fight for all or none !
They hummed and hawed
And smiled reconciled
To the delegation.

From that day on, two men sat
Besides that glossy table
Came early and left late
Waiting for the promised cable
Which did come at last
In terse and simple style,
"Stay, strive and survive", it said.

"He has done it", said one of the two
"You have said it", said the other
"You mean, no doubt, he saved himself"
By the law of the sea, he said,

Big fish could swallow the less big fish ;
"Do your worst or do your best—
Stay to survive is the Chief's message".

So two men sat in Washington
Until one day a lady came;
She brought, she said, the New Order
And would forgive past misdeeds
If they would eat the humble pie.
One said: "So long, my good lady !
I quit, I have a U.S. wife and kids".

Alone now with his colonial past
And anti-colonial future,
One man sat in Washington
Until he was fed up with the humble pie;
Saying better to die in his native land,
He left his post in Washington
Came back to sweet home and oblivion.

THE STORY OF THE MIND

My mind is gone on a quest,
A very tantalysing one ;
Were I to know what it is about
Whether it is chasing a memory,
A haunting face or form
Or solving a secret riddle
Or filling a half-picture caught in a flash
Or an unremembered task,
My lagging here would end.

'Off your mind' is a sneer
One hears so often,
But who can say with hand on heart
His mind is one and whole ;
That it is not darting here and there
Chasing a parallel thought
Listening with eyes which look for away
And nodding the easy affirmative —
A parallel 'yes' to a parallel thought ?

The world is big before you
And all you see and hear are real
The joys and pains and songs and tears,
You are in the midst of them ;
And you have to play your role
You have to joke and laugh
And spend a worthwhile hour ;
What can be more real
Than all this physical world ?

But hark and listen for a moment
To the whisper in your mind
Real to you and no one else,
Which keeps leastwise a running commentary
Except, when it is off and away,
As now, you are drawn irresistibly
To its own course
To listen to its whispers
Until the man in front asks : Are you listening ?

Turn that question inward
And see your mind in a smile
As if to say, I am real too !
To the man in front's "By God I swear",
The mind tells you, His God !
Well, less said the better ;
It is the mind that takes you
To a world of imagination
You can ignore only at your peril.

The world of the mind, you know it too,
Can be more compelling than what you see ;
Else what makes you shudder in the darkness ?
The mind it is that finds the remedy
And tells you, nothing to fear ;
It has to prove the real emptiness
When emptiness itself can't convince you ;
Which is your real world now ?

If you listen to the mind's story,
You'll know it is ever on a quest
Spurred by imagination to serve you,

You guess, for the better ;
It is up and alive well before you
Linking you with yesterday
And then begins its prompting,
Making you act and react
Until you are well on your feet.

Ignore it, you can't, for it is roving
All around you, in front and back,
Blowing all over like the breeze,
Whining and whispering, warning and grinning,
All the while you do this and that
And talk away what you will —
Words of love, tunes of song,
And pranks to your children,
It echoes with you inside.

Ignore it and it plays you tricks
As once down memory lane you heard
The echoes of a sweet voice which said,
"I must don my purdah soon,
My dad will be coming now ;"
She giggled and sparkled until the curtain fell
When the gleaming eyes and the smiling lips
Left that taunting query :
"Who was that damsel on the train" ?

It was your mind that popped the question
When you were with your boss
And he was in a nasty mood, as often ;
"I hope you catch my point", he said
"If we lose that deal, I dread to think,

We shall face disaster''
You nodded and feigned intelligence ;
But you knew your mind was off
Chasing hotly the smiling face in the train.

Let your mind go on its quest
Let it chase its shadows ;
You'll love it when you are alone
You can smile and laugh and shed your tears
In the world created by your mind,
A world which is real, you hear and feel
And see when you close your eyes ;
You are never alone and never ever lonely
When your mind sets the stage.

But the mind, for all that, is a puck
And can make your life a mockery
If it takes command and pulls the reigns
To draw you away from the twos and threes
Of the visible world around you ;
Keep this friend, guide and philosopher
But let him be tied to your physical world
For he can lead and mislead you
Off the chain of your senses.

THE WRITERS WORKSHOP

I knew of course I was ringing the bell
At an ordinary house,
Nothing strange, nothing unique
Just a house in a hundred.

But my mood was in a strange commotion
As I unlatched the little gate
Perhaps, it was all in my heart, you might say,
It is true I was all excited.

What is this Writers Workshop ?
Might as well speak of a poet's mill ;
Who will now open the door
To unravel its story ?

The door unlocked with a little click
Before my eager, curious eyes ;
A young woman smiled with a soft little twinkle
Her welcome to the Writers Workshop.

An ordinary house indeed, but to me
It was the castle of my dreams ;
I barely saw the chairs and curtains
My hungry eyes in a roam.

I shook hands with my charming host
Half my mind in a dream ;
Here at last I was face to face
With the man behind the workshop.

Dreamy eyes are soon betrayed
Though I shot many questions ;
He answered me very patiently
Smiling all the while.

He didn't know, how could he ?
I was looking for the soul
Of this dreamy place, strangely vibrant.
With the heart cries of many minds.

They were all set on a hundred shelves
In blue and red and purple
The skill and throbs of lively minds
Enshrined in print by the Workshop.

I was no writer, nor a poet
But my heart was heavy with the thought
I was neither ; believe me,
In them I see the image of God.

This is really so indeed
For the pen of the writer
Wields God's own power
Of Creation.

Of love and war and joy and grief
And stars and the great rivers,
Of the rugged mountains and fragrant flowers
The writer casts his forms.

In this little hall of this Writers Workshop
Can assemble all the ages,
Of peoples who lived long ago
And the many, many to come.

Turn those little pages, picturesquely bound,
You are plunged deep in the passions
Of the men who spelled those words,
Their minds in a blaze.

The Writers Workshop is a dream castle
To the writer whose heart is heavy
With his mind's unburdened thoughts
And its unshared melodies.

They roam, the poets and the story-tellers —
The wide spaces are not wide enough —
Till they put their thoughts into words
Inspired by the Writers Workshop.

The sky pours out the life-giving rain
The stars shed their light
The writers pour their hearts out
And find a niche in the Writers Workshop.

I shook hands with my host
And left that ordinary house
But brought with me those thoughts
About the Writers Workshop.

EVER BEING, NEVER SHOWING

Way back from my cradle
I am told I was told
The best joy of all
Came from the love of God.

Indeed, God was everywhere —
"God be thanked", "God save us",
"God's will be done ;"
God was part of me.

I could not lie,
I could not even think
A wrong thought because I knew
God was watching me.

It was not long before
I became afraid of this God,
For, like everyone else,
I was sinning all the way.

Gently, gently, the murmer rose
In gentle protest in my mind :
Human after all, aren't you ?
Sin you may, but shouldn't you live ?

I couldn't share my eats
With my comrades
Since little could I have
And I needed it all.

But God's eyes were on me
And I squirmed for eating
Without partaking
My wherewithal with others.

My sins were thus mounting
Till my childhood years ended,
When at long last around me
I found all alike me were sinners.

O God, truth is not bitter ;
Lie and lie as we may,
There are many like me
They too are your children.

God then became a friend
My prayers with understanding
Took Him into confidence
With a sense of sin no more.

I became a man of success
Of wealth and wordly wisdom
I learnt to play the game
Of every man for himself.

More than this I advanced —
I could even preach to others
How God had shown the way
For me to guide them.

As the years passed,
I saw too many godly men
All ready to serve and help
All like me, dear God !

Only then, I framed the question
Who are you, my God ?
I wanted an answer badly
Warring long with myself.

You are an eternal challenge
Whom no one can beat
Except my brother atheist
For whom you don't exist.

It is his easy way out
For what humanity
In all ages and climes
Has been seeking to find.

No one can demonstrate
Any vision of you ;
Your forms and your names
Are endless picturisations.

But when accidents happen,
Calculations go wrong,
When the mind gets beyond itself,
There is a glimpse of you.

Talk of blind nature's havoc
Talk of the ages
And the unseen spaces,
There is a glimpse of you.

See a beautiful face
And then an ugly one,
A wise one and a foolish one,
Well, aren't you there behind ?

Read of forgotton cities,
The splendour and the horrors —
Why didn't they survive ?
Weren't you there behind ?

Have you thought of heredity ;
One child in a million,
But your own little child
Has your familiar image.

If these mean you exist,
You are everywhere ;
In simple truths and deep mysteries,
Ever being, never showing.

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ANOTHER DAY

Gone is yet another day, in the folds
Of time are buried its secrets ; its events
Have become history. Matters it now
What joys it brought, what tears ? What gains,
What losses ! Links of the chain of time,
They pass, mocking or smiling they pass, and tomorrow
From the dark assumes its shape. Look now
For the day reborn - new hopes, new dreams
New plans all. Here then is a new accounting
With no choice for the gambler in this gambling world ?
Why look back ? Build your castle fully insured
Against lurking fears and hazards of every kind ;
You may lose, but a living day has only one impulse —
Act now, for the moon may be yoars, even if for a day.

MR. NOBODY'S THOUGHTS

No, there is no grave for you,
They will burn you at the ghat ;
But of what avail is that for you ?
If not dust, let go with ashes.

You know it has to be so,
No foot-prints for you on the sands of time ;
There is no story to tell,
The bells won't toll for you.

Not a hero for whom flags have waved,
No memorials in commemoration ;
No tomes of arts and letters
To remember you to posterity.

Yet to yourself, your ego cries,
Aren't you something ?
The world has been your playground
And you too have played your games.

There were many battles lost
But they were also battles fought ;
Good for you those unrecorded battles
At times to feel some pride.

You have been bent and bludgeoned
And you have hit back in vain
You lost and lost and paid the price
And took it in your stride.

And those who have loved you
Yet seen you lose and helpless,
With kind words of mourning
Will leave you well alone.

That grave, if grave there is,
Will cover your unknown story
Unrecorded on the past
And unremembered on the present.

To the grave with you there goes
Memories of your childhood ;
Who but your parents, all gone now,
Would know those sweet old days.

And then your pranks of youth
The gaiety and the rumpus
All tamed at length to mediocrity
Until you settled for a non-entity.

But you loved and wed
And fondled your little kids
They looked up to you in pride and joy
Until they knew your obscurity.

You knew you did your little best
But the world knew you not ;
Crazy, keeping your pot boiling,
You left the world go by.

You built your world in your home
Your children were your friends
Your wife was your partner
You had a happy life that way.

There was a man who wished to be
A bridegroom in a marriage procession
And a corpse in a funeral procession
Ever seeking the No. 1 place.

But you left the processions go by
Content to stand and watch,
Holding your children by the hand
Giving them a view of the great.

Good enough for you those little joys
Hugging your little like a treasure ;
No time to see the rainbows
Saving the embers in your hearth.

The flags and festoons are not for you
They are meant for the winners ;
They get stately memorials
And you your six-foot mound.

What if it is dust,
And what if it is ashes ?
Your little story goes with you
And the world will pass you by.

"Yet", the ego cries, "I am gone,
But here lies my mortal frame"
But it is mute non-existence
And silence is your company.

Hold, some day of a calm evening,
Someone may come and lay some flowers
In faintly remembered grief—
Well, smile a bit now, for you'll not know it then.

OF SEAS

O sea, the mighty majestic inspiring sea
Spread before me miles beyond miles
With foam-fringed waves in relentless spree
To suck to fatal depths with deceptive guiles
All that your feather-white tongues tempt to your trap ;
Is there no end to your hunger, ravishing demon ?
But alas, here on land too, it seems, we face mishap
For man-made seas draw us to their prison —
Monstrous factories, their chimneys darkening the sky,
Surging upward in squarish asphalt waves
Where hungry humans get lost with not even a cry
Losing their souls in the depths of their caves ;
We can't resist them, just as we can't resist you, sea,
In the evolving life of man, there is no you and me.

COLOURS AND MULTI-COLOURS

Time is a deterrent to continuity
The old man mused pompously ;
That morning in the mirror he had seen
The furrows on his face.

He had seen as well his daughter's bloom
His skinny bony lass
Grown with Time's many bounties ;
Had he lost or gained ?

There were years when now in leaps
And now by inches he climbed the social scale ;
The fire of youth and the lapses, he smiled,
Gone, all gone, gone for ever.

Those were days when people died
With the Cross in their palm
Or the Koran on their lips
And the Hindus went to Heaven.

But when the bomb swooped Hiroshima
They had no time for prayer
Old Father Time showed in a moment
A millenium end in a crash.

You cannot hug a clock
And bid time to stillness
You cannot shut your eyes
And say it is all dark.

Yes, Time moves - why, it flies —
What has it meant to me ?
It has made me an old man
My hair is grey and all with years.

Could I but strike a bargain
With dear old Father Time,
I might have kept with me,
Joy in eternity and eternity in joy.

No, that was not to be
The years had to run ;
I see myself an old man
But the world is fresh and new.

While young, I always felt
We were making a new world ;
Now I see it is not a new world at all,
A new world is still in the making.

Dragging my feet in the morning
I palpitate on speed
But I look back and it is all grey,
Look forward, it is dazzling multi-colour.

I mourn a lot for what is gone
Forgetting I would go too, soon ;
I cannot ever continue with Time,
Why should I be Father Time too ?

Now that you say it, I like it,
I like old Time to fly ;
New winds start blowing
Fresh roses all around.

So, the world keeps changing
From colours to multi-colours ;
They touched the moon the other day,
They will touch Mars ere long.

Many flowers will fade and die
But many will blossom and bloom
Those changes, let them come
In a series or in cycles.

Yes, Time is a deterrent to continuity
Let it well be so ;
For if Time stands still, it is death
And death is killing and chilling.

THE BELLE AND THE SIREN

The village belle smiled with the breeze
Blowing her hair in the rustic air;
Her buxom taunts and naughty sighs
Teasing him to madness.

The young man stood, coy like a maid
With melting eyes but strong of frame
Clouds of hair wild on his forehead
His tongue in torrential silence.

As pride lit up his bride to be
She railed her humbled Hercules
Is there a tale surpassing one
Of the hero tamed by love ?

Nature's ruggedness stamped its mark
On this couple of the wilderness;
No gold, or silk or bottled scents
Were needed for their happiness.

The village watched the idyll and laughed—
Youth should gather their rosebuds;
The picture blended with the rocks and bushes
That is the love of the lakes.

A stream-lined limousine hove on the highway
Hailing them with its screams
"The d—d thing has stopped for some water",
Crooned the glittering siren at the wheel.

The rustic youth rallied to help
And all that was needed was done,
"Hop in for a ride" shouted the siren
And the happy boy climbed in.

The belle stood by in shocked distress
And waved goodbye in sick disgust—
"Leaving me and my flood of love
The fool he goes for powder and puff."

The siren was sweet and the siren was hot
And as months passed in gay abandon,
The rustic youth grew big with whiskers
Gave up the belle for the siren.

The siren she loved the rainbow colours
And looked around for newer thrills;
The jilted youth fell out in the race
And settled to city ways.

The belle at home, mother nature's child,
Accepted life as it came
And stoically found a mate that won her
With nothing but flowers and fruits.

The siren drooped and the young man drooped ;
The gold and the silk and the limousines
Brought nothing back of his native sky
And the magic of his beauteous belle.

He came back home one murky day
Grieved and in tatters, and saw
The belle and her kids and her husband dear
And departing said, "God be with her, I go to Hell"

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

A joker with poison on his tongue
He is everybody's friend ;
With a big harvest of tales
He flatters while he kills.

Welcome in every home where ears
Are attuned to good listening
About other people's pains
He laughs in pity and weeps in joy.

No anatomist can tell
How one eye can laugh
While another glistens with tears,
Which is for him a child's play feat.

A crisis is in sight
When a Montague sits with a Capulet
But he leaves both clapping
On slimy double-tongued wit.

Waking up with the lark
And busy like a bee
He daily gets his gossip
And spills it free for all.

The old poet's words
'With every word a reputation dies'
Were never more truly said
Than when he was around.

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DEATH, BE NOT PROUD

I

[LOVER'S LAMENT]

Death, be not proud—this is her wedding day ;
You Invincible, Inexorable, where is your might ?
Can you be my friend and take me away ?
No terror, Death, against Fate you are too light ;
The heart bleeds, tears are dry, Death, where are you ?
No, you are not the end, you don't wipe it all away.
There are worse than you, suffering, pain ever comes anew ;
I would kiss you for love, if only you could end my day !
More formidable than you are defeat, shame and despair,
I am down, drowned in all these ;
My love, poor dear, she doesn't know how I care,
How my heart so entwined will never find peace ;
See you, death, I shall triumph over you yet —
Watch, in my living night, the sun of my love will never set.

DEATH, BE NOT PROUD

II

NOT THE END

Death, be not proud ; no, you are not the end—
On my grave the sun shall shine, the flowers bloom,
The stars emerge in the night and pour their soft blend
Of blue and amber light breaking through the gloom ;
The rivers calmly flow and sea waves splash in glory ;
The music of birds and babble of tender tongues
Make the world tell its never-ending story
Though your fell hand can strike and strike your fatal thongs ;
Seen ever flowers droop and fall, so heart-rending ?
Yet, when soft winds blow and rain pours down
Trees and shrubs sprout shoots and buds abounding
Leaving my trail all gay and the sun all over this town !
May be, the chill of your blight stills all for the moment—
Untiring as you are, creation to me makes you impermanent.

VIRGIN EVER

If the stars glitter and twinkle
And mountain peaks try to reach the sky,
Blossoms waft their fragrance,
Waves engulf and beat on land
In frustrated roars of anguish,
Rivers crawl through plains now
And now flood through dizzy canyons
And birds twitter in the sky
Flapping and gliding and flapping—
You know you have seen it all before.

Yes, it has been there before,
And it will be there long, long years after
And a million pair of eyes
Have watched them, smiled and wept
With their moods, for they say
Nature responds !
Like a woman ?
What a woman who has given her sighs
And laughter, surrendered to passion,
Stirred desires, embedded memories,
Stilled wide-eyed joy to sweet repose
On green and red, yellow and purple—
You gave and gave to insatiate man !

Yet they call you virgin Nature, what ?
Virgin who has yielded your joys
To everyone that sought it
And to every age !

What are your charms ?
Is it fulfilment realised and yet
Promised, more and more intense,
As much as the heart can want ?

Your secrets of what is behind
Your promises of 'Long for it and get it'
Your glimpses of strange
And stranger mysteries—
Are these your charms
That hold generations aslave ?
O Virgin that gives and ever yet
A virgin be, with ever-unfolding
Ever-binding, ever-soothing
Ever-rousing beauty !

Shared virgin of the ages !
What I see and gorge
Have been seen and gorged before
From Time's beginning
By primordial man—
And woman ?
What do they see in you ?
Your fittiness and sweet and surly moods !
And they do you the honour
Of adopting your fashions.

Mountains and seas, flowers and vines,
Stars and clouds and high winds
We keep staring
For you to change,
To kaleidoscope your colours,

Shades and smells and sounds,
For rains to pour in dull monotony
And floods to rise in tempestuous fury ;
Your unbounded grace and untrimmed wildness
Never fade, never fail to excite
And ever produce newer and newer thrills;
Most ravished virgin,
And virgin yet—and ever.

HE LAUGHED BEFORE DYING

A smiling, laughing. jeering little boy
He hailed me one day as I passed ;
In tatters which went for clothing,
Not yet in his teens, he had no need to be shy.

"You ! it is you ! I call," he said as I turned
And he was full of glee I thought.
"Why can't you give me a coin," he mocked
"A coin or two which can get me a meal ?"

"Well, I can" I said responding
"But why don't you work, you have hands and feet ?'
"Why don't I work folks ?" he parried back—
"Why can't I work—because I'm going to die".

"Why should you die" I asked, "If you can work ?
Work means money and money means food,"
"You are right," he said, "I can work, I can work ;
But hunger has eaten me this seven-day week".

With a twinge in my heart I threw him a coin
But I noticed he did not pick it up ;
He stared in disbelief, then grinned and laughed
"Too late, my Babu, it's too late," he said.

Two hawkers nearby commented rather wryly
"Don't mind him, sir, he has been ill
He has not eaten for many a day,
Hunger has eaten him, just as he said."

"But he talks and begs and why can't he work?
I persisted in all good faith;
"He can only talk and laugh, dear sir,
He can't lift his hands, his limbs are dead."

I passed off in disgust—these poor men's stories,
They are all over the town, but a day or two later.
I passed that way and learnt
The municipal black van had taken his corpse away.

BACKGROUNDS

The rainbow in the sky, does it keep you enthralled ?
Know why ? Look at the black and white rain-filled clouds.

Wait for the sky to darken and grey
Then see the pouring effusion of stars.

The marsh and the lake keep you afar
But their lotus blossoms hold you in a spell.

Dig deep into the caves of the earth
For your silver and gold and gems that glow.

The sloppy murky shells of the sea
Hide their pearls which spell sighs and brawls.

And is it not from abysmal darkness
Rises each day the life-giving sun ?

I know a man gnawed dead by hunger
But gave his country its national song.

*From M. P. Appan.

OF ART AND SCIENCE

The winds of the sky drop their pollens
Though invisible, they sink with the rain-drops ;
I have seen in our little town
Nature's handiwork in several crops.

It became my game to watch them spread
Many died by the way but many survived
Then came buds and flowers so red
They showed the sublimity God contrived.

Is a painter like God ? I saw one draw a line,
Add new lines in jerks and pauses
Then came shades of many a design
And life was breathing in those faces.

I didn't know how that first phrase came to my mind
I saw it draw other words to sing and rhyme
Line by line I wrote them to find
Words within me proliferating with time.

Art, if you ponder, is the same as science
Both are deep-mixed with creation
Art builds shapes and gives voice to silence
Science breaks secrets for new animation.

BY THE LAKE SIDE*

You write your poems well, my dear,
But I am there in them so little
Poets sing, they say, on all those near
Sometimes I wonder if I am near you still.

I glanced around the lake, spread wide
As far as the eye could see
The evening sun was glowing in pride
Conquettish birds were gliding in glee.

We were sitting side by side
Like crazy lovers dreading the light
The lake side is where we always bide
Waiting for the sun to give way to night.

You are there so little, dear wife, you say,
In my poems, you mean ?
Can it be guile you put it that way—
You are ever with me, dear, seen and unseen.

Whence do you think spring my thoughts
Of beauty, joy and love—
Of loneliness, passion and lots
Of colours below and stars above ?

From you, my dear, my words I find,
Your moods do make my rhymes
Your laughter rings the muse in my mind—
I see nothing but you, I feel at times.

*Free translation from M. P. Appan

Can the root complain about the flower ?
You are the root which sprouts the bud ;
I sing, it is true, from my dreamy bower
But my mind is filled with your flesh and blood.

If words come from my heart, my love,
Then surely they come from you
For ever you fill my heart, as now—
This heady wine is your brew.

My words came very soft and low
And I saw her eyes glisten;
It was only for a moment though
For her smile soon broke like heaven.

MAN'S LAW FOR HIMSELF

The rope blamed the noose
The noose likewise the rope
Said the corpse, "I couldn't care less ;
My angry race is run."

Death said : "I don't know—
I didn't take his life.
The rope and the noose
And the hangman are to blame.

Rumble on rumble broke out ;
"Who was the killer ?"
"You shall be hanged", the judge had said.
Untill you be dead."

Right, but he didn't pin the crime
He only gave the sentence ;
The prosecution got its man
To pay for his kill.

Then it was said, it was the law
Which ended his life !
Who made the law and why ?
Killing by law is no killing ?

Man has made the law of his world
To save good man from himself ;
One killer is outside the law
And one is within.

Law has a word in too edgewise :
"You have heard I'm an ass, else,
Why has every such corpse a smile
At this man's law for himself ?"

TWILIGHT WHISPERS

From his third-floor height, the city is bathed
In a flood of light in criss-cross lines
Neon lights blinking red and blue
And zooming cars in trails.
Every night it is the same, my dear,
Every night it is the same.

To live is to speed to earn and spend
There is rapture in achievement,
They say they hold hands in discotheques,
Work hard in day and flirt hard at night.
Near the window here, my dear,
With this fresh air, you will not tire.

What screaming headlines they have in the papers
They are hailing the astronauts,
Air stations are coming up, they say,
And you can travel in the sky.
My legs are aching so, my dear,
What did you say just now ?

Our grandchild is wearing her frock too high
They call it mini-skirt ;
Nor do I like her pal's drain-pipe pant
Though they wear it now that way.
I miss very much our old Ravi, my dear,
They say he has been ordered rest.

Don't you think those boys and girls
Are bright and blooming ?
They should be so, indeed, they should be so
Up and about and up and about.
Shall we retire now, my dear ?
All evening we have sat, you know.

I love the city and its flood of lights
I love those criss-cross beams
Those neon lights blinking red and blue
And zooming cars in trail.
Never tire, my dear, never tire
The day is best when it's evening.

AUTUMN AIRS

Say hurray for those autumn airs
The disguises of the years;
Innings ended, passions spent
Walk to the evening backwards.

Hurray for those evening hours
He needs it, he needs it much
Having failed in all his battles
But one, to live up to autumn.

Hurray again for those morals brave
Learnt from daily slips and blunders;
Bravo for not breaking down
Trying to reach his height.

It is the hour of the musings
On days of long ago
Never-ending days of never-ending stories
One chasing another.

If you have time to spare, spare it,
For he needs it for his years;
Glean some wisdom too if you find it
Say hurray for those autumn years.

SUPPLEMENT

STRAY POEMS

By

BIYA

"Biya" is a research student in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

MOD VERSE

The greatest ever
This new Art !
A mirror that gives to each
His own image,
It has no content
Only a container;
It will hold as much sense
As you put in.
It requires no rhyme, no metre, no method,
It is so absurd
As to seem profound !
The less you understand,
The more you feel
There must be something in it.
But blessed this art
Or how could I
Lay claim to poesy ?

DISCORD

A blotch of paint on a pretty picture
The odd man out, the note that jars—
What is it that divides people and me,
Why an alien, even a willing outcast ;
Why shut my ears from others' talk
Their ignorance or my mistake
Why this discord ?

What language speaks the odd man out
What language, the rest ?
I stretch my hands towards them
None but my own clasps it;
Why does nature have freaks, those blots on the landscape
Between the world and me,
Why this discord ;

LIFE, THE LIVERS AND ME

A rut, a hell hole
A ditch, a gutter
A regular stinking swamp
We all wallow in it
Though strutting on two feet
        This is life !

Nameless, faceless, we move in a procession
We display our silly feathers,
And mouth empty formulae
We are everything but ourselves
One is to two is to three is to four
        This is us !

We have philosophers too !
Those complex scoffers
They laugh at existence
Publish their works;
I can't stand the stink, I hate this mire
I want to fall out of line
Like an unbroken colt, I seek to strive loose
But ho, it is time to go or
I will miss my place in the procession—
        This is me.

A LOVE STORY

The day was still young,
A touch of grey lingered in the dawn
A gentle breeze wafted through
Sending a delicious tremour among the trees.

Shy and pure and cool stood the champa
Like a bashful young maiden
Reaching out to her was Gulmohar
His curly head just touching her pale face.

The breeze passed between them
They stood apart while
All nature watched their courting
Softly bending in the breeze she surrendered
He enveloped her in his arms
hey kissed, and
Daylight broke through.

DAWN AND DUSK

There is a flowering in my heart,
A secret bud, a fragrant unfolding,
A song in my mind, a tune on my lips,
Stars in my eyes, wings on my feet ;
All nature laughs, there is a festival of joy
The world is so gay that I have found my love.

My heart is so heavy, burdened with sighs ;
My eyelids are weighed with unshed tears ;
My mind is so empty, my soul is dead,
My eyes lack lustre, my feet are lead,
There is a greyness in things, dust and ashes is life —
All nature weeps, for I have lost my love.

THE TOUCH OF GENIUS

I often feel in me
A demon of strange discontent
That chews me up, tears me apart;
Yet, it is an intangible phantom
I can tell no one.
It works inside me, like an imprisoned bird
Desperate for release but striving in vain
I feel myself rocketted heavenward
And abruptly dropped down a deep abyss;
It promises so much, I hasten to capture it,
I hold out my hands, I want to hug it to me
But the elusive golden sprite deserts me
Takes with it the glimpse of things beyond
Leaves me empty handed, stuck fast in slimy mud.

LONELINESS

I feel so lonely
And loneliness is fatal;
It is a loneliness of a kind
That brooks no definition.
It is when you feel lost,
When people smile, laugh and talk
It is when you
Open your heart to him
And he gives an uncomprehending look
Loneliness is when you see something beautiful
And have none to share it with;
Acute loneliness is when you can tell no one
Your hopes, fears, dreams;
It creeps upon you,
Gnaws your soul
So that you die
A slow, lingering
Embittered Death.

A MAD MAN'S SONG

The world is mad, but look at them,
Scurrying at such amazing speed ;
I shall catch that little girl
Ask her where she goes ?
Screech ! she screams, she runs and tumbles—
What is wrong with her ?
Why do they mock me, these gibbering people
"He is mad", they whisper, lunatic, "insane"
I shall teach them to tell tales, the fools
There is none saner than I ;
I brandish a stick, they run off, the rats ...

There goes a lady, so pretty, so kindly
I shall tell her my case, she will sympathise ;
Why ? Why does she start, turn pale and run ?
Pretty lady, don't run, let me explain !
She has gone - and dropped her purse
I don't want it.
Ha ! But look at the mad, mad world,
They are all falling over it.

Fighting like dogs over a piece of bone ;
There goes a little boy, what has he in his hand ?
Hi, ouch . . hit me, will you ?
There is a bigger stone and a better aim
Yell, yes cry, you deserve it, hold your fort,
He's bleeding, Ha ! Bleeding like a pig ;
But that blood, O God, that blood, my wife's blood—
Then he must be around, the murderer who hacked her—
Yes, now I see him, the knave, the rogue,

He shall not escape me today—
I shall kill him, chop him down,
I am fast, very fast, he cannot run away
Let go, I tell you, let me go, lest he escapes,
Why do they hold me down, these people,
        Where are you taking me ?
        You are mad
        I am Sane,
        Let me go.

WHAT THE CYNIC SAID

Trust no future however pleasant
Let the dead past bury its dead
Nor have faith in the living present
'Tis despair now and disillusionment ahead.

Lives of mortals all remind us
Life is but a tragic game
Where man neither wins nor loses
Nor leaves foot-prints on the sands of time.

Let us then lose faith in living
For in despair there is gain
Then we who have nothing to lose
May be gainers in what we find.

A PRAYER

The tide of life flows away from me
My dreams go scattering in the wind
When life's comforts flee, my heart turns to thee,
To thy divine solace.

Cynical and hard, I scorn to take your name,
Then adversity strikes, and thou art revealed to me ;
Softened and chastened by trials, I turn to thee
To thy boundless compassion ?

Proud in my security but abject in misery
I represent the scourge of the human race ;
Yet, when all else goes, I turn to thee
To thy ever lasting arms.

O SAY WHAT IS THAT THING CALLED FAITH ?

O say what is that thing called faith
Which I must ne'er enjoy ;
What are the blessings of this faith,
O tell this athiest popinjay.

You talk of wondrous deeds of faith
You say it guides you right ;
I do my prayers but how can faith
Or make it wrong or right ?

My wrong or right myself I make
Whene'er ill or well my ways ;
And could I myself truly righteous make
With me 'twere always right.

With heavy sighs, I hear the seers
Mourn my godless ways
But with an insolence that scarce hears
I can ignore his unseen grace.

Then, let not what I cannot have
My cheer of mind destroy ;
While thus I live, I merrily live,
Although an athiest popinjay.

BITTER-SWEET

He looked into mine eyes
Searching its depths
I peered into his
Reading his soul
The world around was hushed
As in silence we communed·

Suddenly we ... No ! they spoke
My dream was shattered.
Slighted by cupid I wept in my wheel-chair
The couple moved elsewhere
An intruder-I wheeled away
Lone into the lone eerie night.

NOW AS THEN

They lived and mated
They loved and hated
each other
They laughed and sang;
They wept and bemoaned
their fate
They quarrelled and made up
They wrangled and reconciled
in those days—

They lived as we live
They loved as we love
They hated as we hate
But they the dead past
And we the living present.

SAY NOT IN RAPTUROUS NUMBERS

Say not in rapturous numbers
Life is but a joyous dream
For 'tis your wisdom slumbers
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real, life is cruel
And joy is not its goal
Honesty, truth, right and duty
Are empty philosophies old !

Not contentment nor happiness
Is our destined end or way
But courage to fight each coming day
Far bleaker in prospect than today.

In this great field of battle
In this gambling den of life
Be not pious bleating cattle
Be a hero in the strife.

THE MUSIC THAT IS LIFE

Melodies run like a thread
through existence
Giving it a kind of fullness
when one looks back.

Sometimes the rhythm is gay, laughing
One moves in glad harmony.
Yet at times the music is elusive,
The ghosts of our yearning haunt us.
Now the melody is sad, nostalgic ;
Our yester years taunt us.
Our knowledge of unfulfilled dreams
And of days never to return ;
Sometimes the song is frightening, grim
The hound of death rends the air
With its ghostly wails.
A poem is there in lovers' glances
The melody runs through meetings and partings.

This delightful music, the babies' gurgle
The cooing voice, the sweet lullaby ;
The settings are infinite, the melodies vary ;
Yet in all, the tune persists—
Now gay, now sad
Now haunting, now soothing
Now solemn, now frivolous
Now harsh, now tender, sweet
Goes the music that is life.

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Melodies run like a thread
through existence
Giving life a kind of fullness
When one looks back.

NOTES

IN SAFFRON ROBES

1. Mahatma Gandhi, when he settled down for political work in India after his return from South Africa, established his Ashram (literally, hermitage) at Sabarmati, on tbe banks of the Sabarmati river in what was then the Bombay Presidency. Here, Congressmen gathered around him and his famous 'satyagraha' campaigns were planned. During these years, he introduced the rule that Congressmen must wear only white 'Khaddar' or 'Khadi', hand-spun, hand-woven cloth, to campaign against the import of textiles from Britain.

2. Nathuram Vinayak Godse was the man who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. He told the Court during trial that he did it to prevent pressurisation of Nehru's Government by Mr. Gandhi to show favours to Pakistan.

3. There is an old story in the Upanishads (Hindu scriptures) that a thief once hid in a king's bed-room and heard him tell the queen that he proposed to wed his daughter, not to any high-born Prince, but to the first saintly youth among those who would sit at the gate of the State temple, the next morning. The thief, thrilled to know this secret, took his seat the next morning at the head of the crowd dressed in ochre robes like a Hindu saint. The Princess, as planned by the king, went to garland him. In a flash,

the realisation came to the false saint: "If the mere wearing of these robes can bring me such a good fortune, if I truly prove worthy of them, I will become blessed indeed by God." Accordingly, he declared himself to the Princess and gave up the pleasures of life and became a true sanyasi.

AT RAJGHAT

Rajghat, on the banks of the Jamna river skirting India's capital city, New Delhi, was the place where Mahatma Gandhi's mortal remains were cremated in January 1948. It has been now built up with a memorial in a novel architectural design.

1. Untouchables (low caste Hindus) were called by Mahatma Gandhi as "Harijans" meaning Children of God.

2. Some years after Mahatma Gandhi's death, UNESCO organised a Seminar to formulate Gandhian philosophy in the form of a doctrine for the guidance of the world's leaders working for peace. The Seminar failed to produce any noteworthy result.

   Daridra-narayan is a phrase Mr. Gandhi used often to describe the poorest of the poor in India. "Narayan" is a name for a Hindu God, "Vishnu". "Daridra" means poor.

   In a famous letter to the Governor-General (then Lord Linlithgow) before one of his fasts, Mahatma Gandhi said : "The law of satyagraha as I knew it presents a remedy in such moments of trial. In a sentence, it is "crucify the flesh by fasting". (Satyagraha means in practice some kind of civil resistance and penance). The issue at the time was the British Government's view that Mr. Gandhi's call for the "Quit India" movement in 1942 led to widespread terrorism in the country. Mr. Gandhi held that his movement was meant to be non-violent and peaceful and any violence, which occurred, was the result of police repression and was not in any case attributable to his followers. Gandhi went on his fast saying: "You...have suspected my bona fides".

AT THE LAKSHMINARAYAN TEMPLE [IN NEW DELHI]

1. Yahya Khan, who was President of Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistan war (1972) over Bangla Desh, was accused of permitting terrible atrocities against the people, including women, of Bangla Desh by Pakistan's army personnel.
2. Tourists' Guide : Shiva, the Destroyer, is one of the Trinity of Gods in the Hindu pantheon— Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer.

THE STORY OF THE MIND

Ref. "As once down memory lane you heard": This refers to an incident about a Muslim girl in purdah travelling in a train, who raised her veil when her escorting father got down at a stop for a few moments, and pulled it down again when he re-entered.

AT THE COLONIAL OUT-POST

1. During the second world war, many countries in Asia and Africa ruled by colonial regimes had established small semi-diplomatic offices in Washington to propagate their views to appease U. S. public opinion which was in favour of full independence to the colonies. When, as happened suddenly in many countries, free national governments were established, these diplomatic offices in Washington were found to be manned by people who had been loyal to the out-going regime. Some of these officials were clever enough to rehabilitate themselves in the new governments, but others had to pay the penalty for their loyalty to the colonial powers.

THE WRITERS WORKSHOP

This is a non-profit-making institution bringing together young Indian writers in prose and verse using the English medium through publication of their attempts. Many Indo-Anglian (a phrase popularised by the workshop) writers have become known through these publications besides finding a great deal of encouragement from them.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan's Sri Sankaracharya Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya

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